THE DRYLAND DIARIES

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By

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ABSTRACT

The Dryland Diaries is a multigenerational narrative in the epistolary style, a tale of four women, central character Luka; her mother Lenore; grandmother Charlotte; and great-grandmother Annie – cast in the Quebecoise tradition of the *roman du terroir,* invoking place and family, the primal *terroir* of a storyteller**.** The novel is driven by three acts of violence – the possible murder of Annie's husband, Jordan, by her Hutterite father; the rape of Charlotte; and the probable murder of Lenore by a notorious serial killer. Set in rural Saskatchewan and Vancouver, Luka, a single mother, finds Annie's and Charlotte's journals in the basement of her farm home, where both her predecessors also lived. She reads their stories while attempting to come to terms with her search for her missing mother, and with her attraction to her former flame, Earl, now married. Luka learns that Jordan disappeared shortly after the Canadian government enacted conscription for farmers in the First World War, when Annie became a stud horsewoman, her daughter Charlotte born before the war ended. Letters and newspaper clippings trace the family's life through the drought and Great Depression; then Charlotte's diaries reveal her rape at Danceland during the Second World War. Her daughter, Lenore, grows up off-balance emotionally, and abandons her daughters. Luka returns to Vancouver and learns her mother's fate. Told from Luka's point of view, in first-person narrative with intercutting diary excerpts and third-person narratives, the novel examines how violence percolates through generations. It also examines how mothers influence their children, the role of art, how the natural world influences a life, and questions our definition of "home." At its heart, the novel is a story about what makes a family a family, about choices we make toward happiness, and about how violence perpetuates itself through the generations. Inspired by Margaret Lawrence's *The Stone Angel*, Carol Shields' *The Stone Diaries*, and the place-particular writing of Annie Proulx and Guy Vanderhaeghe, *The Dryland Diaries* paints a family portrait of loss, hope and redemption, locating it on the boundaries of historical fiction, firmly within the realm of epistolary and intergenerational narrative.

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DEDICATION

~ for Mom ~

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

The Dryland Diaries had its beginnings in a story told repeatedly by my mother and aunt – both *Prairieleit*, of pacifist off-Colony Hutterite extraction – of their great-grandfather, killed by his father-in-law, his body purportedly dumped down a prairie well. The image haunted me, and in 2011, when our family's rural land was inundated by the "flood of the century," I began to wonder how I could weave several threads – a flood, a dead man in the well, violence from a pacifist – into a story. Stories begin as oral recountings, memories, or a memory of a memory, passed from generation to generation, seeping into crevices, filling gaps. Stories nourish us, sustain us, identify us. What emerged from my mother's story became mine, spun from truth and woven with fiction, an intergenerational narrative written in the epistolary style, a tale of four women, cast in the Quebecoise tradition of the *roman du terroir*, invoking place and family, the primal *terroir* of a storyteller.

I was writing a story, and the tale counted above all, but when I began to question the themes that were materializing, I turned to the writer and literary educator, Douglas Glover. In his book, *Attack of the Copula Spiders*, he writes:

> To arrive at your theme (if you're not lucky enough to figure out what you are doing right away), you need to ask yourself over and over: what does this material illustrate to me about what I believe to be the way the world works? The key here is that you have to arrive at some rock-bottom belief of your own – it doesn't have to be right, to agree with modern therapeutic or sociological theory or be politically or statistically correct or jibe with what your mother told you when you were three. It just has to be something you believe, rather than something you've been taught or told to believe. (17)

This is a liberating notion, reflective of my ideas about what good fiction can do to mirror the world we occupy, individually and as a society. Glover's words led me to interrogate my assumptions about men and women, about male violence, about women's rights and women's work, about mothers and daughters, about cities and rural places and faith and place and home. Of course the lens of my own experience tempered my questions: I'd been raised in a gypsy Air Force family, and as a young mother, I longed to feel rooted. When I learned more about my off-Colony Hutterite bloodlines, I asked myself: why do people raise children as they do? What triggers acts of violence? How does violence echo through a family's generational life? How do parents learn new ways to raise their children, different from how they themselves were raised? What can one woman do? How do mothers influence their daughters and sons? How does nature – or a rural life – influence a person's life and lifeview? How does faith? And art? What defines a home?

What I believe – and wrote into *The Dryland Diaries* – is informed by my own life experience and observations. I believe that women hold up the sky. That the world is a scary and beautiful and dangerous place, rampant with hypocrisy and violence that echoes through the generations. I know that not every woman is designed by nature to be a parent. I've learned that family and some faith or other is bedrock to finding meaning in life, and that happiness arises from living a

life that resonates with contentment, that redemption is possible. I believe that making art can sustain a soul, and that rural life, with feet and hands in the soil, is regenerative and grounding.

As I researched rural life, the Prairieleit, drought and the Great Depression, a serial killer, the sex trade, and changes through the decades in women's jobs and roles, I was fortunate to have several strong female characters to do the heavy lifting for me in this novel. Luka, Charlotte and Annie asked the questions that I had on my mind, and their lives unfolding led the story's development. *If a woman is thus, and this happens, how might she respond?* While I had a beginning, and a second event, I didn't have a clue where each woman was going. I walked and wrote my way into and through their stories – Annie lived through the First World War in rural Saskatchewan; her daughter Charlotte came of age during the Second World War in the small city of Saskatoon, and lost her daughter Lenore to the Downtown East Side of Vancouver. Luka, my contemporary narrator, read about her family as she shaped her own life, returned from Vancouver to modern rural prairie life – and, as Kurt Vonnegut admonished while introducing *Bagombo Snuff Box: Uncollected Short Fiction*, I made awful things happen to my characters: murder, rape, abandonment (9), so my readers would learn what stuff they were made of. Most importantly, I set my narrator the challenge of breaking the pattern of violence that had been part of her family for several generations.

My writing process was akin to developing land for a garden: it happened in layers, over many drafts. The form I chose, the epistolary narrative, composed of letters, journal entries, and newspaper clippings from 1917 to 1959, was complicated by an overarching and interjectory narrative of Luka's modern voice, life and sensibilities. The epistolary form achieved several aims: to move through time gracefully without sacrificing depth; to use history without glibness; to introduce multiple voices and textures; and to add veracity to a work of fiction.

As writers, we stand on the shoulders of our heroes and predecessors. I am indebted to four writers as my primary influences on structure, language and craft: Carol Shields and Margaret Lawrence as inspirations of intergenerational writing; Guy Vanderhaeghe, for his evocation of place, seamless mastery of multiple timelines and plots, use of language, and voice; and Annie Proulx, for as many reasons, but particularly her mastery of place.

If any questions are asked about violence, about art and nature, about how to live a life and what makes it worth the living, even if no answers arise, this novel has achieved part of my aim.

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Works cited:

Glover, Douglas. *Attack of the Copula Spiders.* Windsor: Biblioasis. 2012. Print.

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